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ABSTRACT

The six-page information sheet addresses the elements in Indian history, culture, psycho-dynamics, and socio-economics that have an impact on Indian child abuse and neglect. Discussion is presented on two myths that Whites have developed in time about Indians: racial superiority which has caused difficulty for the Indian and the necessity for assimilation in order to coexist within the same country. When working with Indian people it is suggested to avoid categorizing all Indians together since cultural diversity exists among Indian tribes. Another suggestion offered is to make an attempt to understand unique cultural attributes when working on a case of Indian child abuse and neglect. Background information is presented on: social organization of Indian families; education as a factor in breaking up the Indian extended family system; and the impact that a nonexistent extended family system has on child-rearing practices. Factors involved in Indian child abuse and neglect among young Indian parents in the urban setting are outlined and incude: immaturity and associated dependency, low self-esteem, difficulty in finding satisfaction in the adult world, difficulty in adusting to the dominant society, loss of control and power, social isolation, lack of parenting skills, difficulty in accepting responsibility for own lives, and limitation of ability to provide an adequate living. (ERB)

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# Indian Culture and Its Relationship to Child Abuse & Neglect

Spring 1979 (Revised Spring 1980)

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# INDIAN CULTURE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT

Spring 1979 (Revised Spring 1980)

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The establishment of the National Indian Child Abuse and Neglect Resource Center (NICANRC) in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1979 is an indication that the U.S. Government finally recognizes that there are unique considerations to be taken into mind regarding Indians when addressing the issue of child abuse and neglect. What elements in Indian history, culture, psycho-dynamics, and socio-ecnomics impact on child abuse and neglect? What special programs are needed for Indians in order to address this issue? And what sensitivities are required by the social service delivery agents when they approach the area of Indian child abuse and neglect?

This paper will attempt to answer some of these questions by providing a very cursory outline of some of these factors, beginning with the initial contacts between the Indian and the white.

## EXPOSING THE MYTHS

First we must deal with some of the myths that whites have developed about Indians, so that we can look at the problem more clearly.

The first myth is the myth of racial superiority. We are told in most creation stories of the major world religions that there were TWO creatures from the beginning: male and female. And we STILL haven't resolved the question of which of THOSE two creatures are superior! There is no future in spending time or energy trying to prove or disprove the superiority of any one race or culture over another. It can only lead to destructive elements in the society, such as race riots. genocide, and discrimination. The history of our country is peppered with such unfortunate destructive elements, arising from this competition for dominance among cultures and races. Indian spirituality in general does not adhere to the dominance paradigm, nor does it seek power over other cultures. It is basically a "live and let live" philosophy. For Indians, this white aberration of racial superiority has been the single most important element in their lives. The following are some of the ways in which it has caused difficulties for Indians:

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--by creating a sense of racial inferiority among many Indians

--by the virtual elimination of many tribes due to massacres and genocidal wars (i.e., Wounded Knee)

--by the systematic destruction of traditional Indian values, languages, social structures, and religion (i.e., in B.I.A. and mission schools especially)

--by the massive relocation of Indian peoples (placement on "reservations", urban relocation, etc.)

--by the exclusion of Indians from the basic rights and freedoms and privileges enjoyed by all Americans (jobs, houses, services)

--by the exploitation of Indian labor, land, culture and artifacts

The second myth we must deal with is the myth of the necessity of assimilation.

There are those who argue that totally apart from racial and cultural differences, it is impossible for such diverse peoples to coexist within the same area, region, or country. This is patently a myth. There are probably more cultural diversities and uniquenesses among white populations in this country than there are among Indian, and yet they are able to coexist in an uneasy alliance.

So basically it is essential that everyone be able to understand both the viability AND the necessity of cultural diversity. This is our choice: a nation of similarly dressed, similarly pigmented, similarly speaking people who live in fear of falling away from the "norm", or a nation of diverse peoples, languages, cultures, and values that coexist together in harmony and peace. Clearly the latter is to be preferred.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Let us discuss for a moment the fact of cultural diversity among Indians. It is important to understand that categorizing all Indians together into a lump must be avoided if we are to take seriously our task. The Bureau of Indian Affairs recognizes 493 Indian tribes, each with distinct cultural/linguistic traits and kin-ship systems. Anthropologists and other scholars have attempted to categorize American Indians in different ways: by geographic designations, by linguistic categories, or by ways in which they provide a living for themselves. One of the most generally accepted is the following by Wissler (1938):

1. Eskimo and Aleut
2. Yukon-McKenzie (caribou food area, mammal hunters)
3. Northwest Coast (fishers)
4. Plateau (salmon food area)
5. California Basin (wild seed gatherers)
6. Plains (bison food area)
7. Eastern Woodlands (Northeast) (modified agriculture)
8. Southeast
9. Southwest (pueblo)
10. Nashua or Aztec (Valley of Mexico)

Kroeber listed seven major areas, with 84 sub-areas:

1. Arctic Coast
2. North (Eastern sub-Arctic-Algonkin and Western-Athabascan)
3. Northwest Coast
4. Intermediate and Intermontane Areas (plateau, great basin, and California)
5. East (plains, prairie, Great Lakes, Ohio Valley, Atlantic Coast, Southeast)
6. Southwest (pueblo)
7. Mexico and Central America

Driver modified Kroeber's list and counted 17 major designations:

1. Arctic, Western
2. Arctic, central and eastern
3. Yukon and Sub-arctic
4. McKenzie Sub-arctic
5. Eastern Sub-arctic
6. Northwest Coast
7. Plains
8. Prairie
9. East (Great Lakes and St. Lawrence to the Gulf)
10. California
11. Great Basin
12. Baja California
13. Oasis (Southwest)
14. Plateau
15. Northeast Mexico
16. Meso-America
17. Circum-Caribbean

It is easy to see that it is possible to develop any number of classification systems for Indians; but it is important to recognize the basic fact that American Indians pose a great amount of cultural, linguistic, and social diversity, and any time we attempt to generalize about them we must take this into account.

With this background, let us attempt to understand some of these unique cultural attributes that have an impact on Indian child abuse and neglect.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Every tribe has its own form of social organization. The basic element to all was the fact that it was internally determined, or sovereign. That is, each tribe determined its OWN social organization based on its own needs and values. Often this included distinct gender-related roles. Some tribes were patrilineal, and others matrilineal. A few were unilineal. But in all these cases, social organization was structured in such a way as to give clearly defined roles to the members of the tribe. These social organization systems took generations and sometimes centuries to develop, and by the time contact was made with whites, tribal patterns were deeply engrained throughout the North American continent.

The Extended Family. One generalization that can be safely made is that the concept and practice of the extended family was widespread

among Indian tribes. That is, few Indian tribes were organized exclusively around the nuclear family, with the two parents and the children forming the nucleus. The extended family was a kinship system that combined relatives on either or both sides of the family of the parents, and often non-related friends, in a network of responsibility and interdependency when it came to child-rearing. In this way the balance was kept, and continuity was assured.

A major element in the destruction of the extended family system among Indians has been the relocation policies of the U.S. Government. These have taken place throughout the history of contact with Indians and whites, but most recently, in the 1950's, the Indian relocation program initiated and carried out that was designed to place large populations of Indians in urban areas, has proven to be most disruptive.

And even now, relocation of whole Indian populations in order to exploit the mineral resources of large land areas is still going on.

In large cities, where the Indian is even more of a minority than he was in the rural areas, the dissolution of family ties has proven to be a major factor in the rising incidence of child abuse and neglect. Whereas there may have been more NEGLECT in the rural areas, when confronted by the additional traumas of city life, urban Indians are becoming more abusive of their children, rather than just neglectful from poverty or lack of information about services available to them.

Education. Education is another factor that has impacted on the break-up of the Indian extended family system.

Traditionally the Indian child was educated within his or her own tribe, maintaining continuity of traditional culture, religion, values, language, and community. Because of the myths of racial superiority and the necessity to assimilate promulgated by the U.S. Government and other non-governmental institutions, the role of educating the Indian child was removed from the Indian tribe and placed in the hands of non-Indians.

The missionary schools were the first to attempt to assimilate the Indian peoples into the dominant culture. In the 1800's schools were set up all over the country designed to "civilize" the natives, beginning with their children.

Mission schools were soon phased out, and the federal boarding school system began. Carlisle was established in 1879 as the first of these boarding schools. Indian children were removed from their homes in huge numbers, placed in boarding schools sometimes for their entire school life (from age 5 to 20), and often these boarding schools were long distances from their homes.

The boarding schools were often located on farms, and the Indian students were required to work the farmland while attending classes. Tribal languages and other customs were forbidden; strict military discipline was enforced. Sometimes military uniforms were worn, and children could be seen marching in lines to class. Many languages virtually disappeared during this period, and Indian children were made to feel ashamed for being from a different culture. Their religion and value systems were held in contempt. In short, their entire self-respect was undermined.

But don't be mistaken: this is not just an anomaly of the past. Even today, approximately 1% of all American children are institutionalized (in foster homes, boarding schools, orphanages, etc.). TWELVE TIMES AS MANY INDIAN CHILDREN ARE INSTITUTIONALIZED.

When Indian families expressed their dissatisfaction at their children being removed so far from home to attend the boarding schools, Congress responded by withholding rations from these families.

During the late 1880's attendance of Indian children in public schools began to be encouraged. By 1934 the Johnson-O'Malley Act provided federal monies to assist public schools in defraying costs of educating the Indian child. Many Indian families did not know these monies were available until just recently, and currently Indians are gaining more and more control over such monies and programs.

In the 1960's other educational programs came into being which have given Indian people more control over the education of their children, such as Upward Bound, Head Start, Community Action Programs, and Job Corps. About this time the concept of locally controlled (Indian-controlled) schools and school boards began to appear. There are currently about 20 Indian-controlled public schools across the country, ranging from kindergarten through higher education levels.

The Indian Education Act (Title IV, P.L. 92-318) of 1972 has been instrumental in creating many innovative educational programs. Hopefully, with Indian involvement in the planning and implementation of these programs, Indian people will gain fuller control over the education of their children.

It is a sad commentary that it took so many years of MISeducation before Indian children were allowed their own dignity and diversity, and Indian parents given back the responsibility of educating their children Hopefully the years of damage are not irreversible and much that has been lost can still be reclaimed.

Child-rearing Practices. Child-rearing practices among Indian peoples have been closely related to the extended family concept, and in that respect have depended on more than just the parents of the children in the role of parenting. As the Indian extended family becomes more and more a thing of the past, Indian parents find it more and more difficult to be "good parents."

This is especially true in the urban situation. The factor of boarding schools in the lives of most Indians has also been disruptive in the sense that so many of the Indian parents of today were raised in the highly authoritarian boarding schools, apart from their own parents, and thus have few good parenting models. The national increase in teenage pregnancy, the growing numbers of single parents, and the rising divorce rates have also affected Indians, just as they have other segments of the society. Increased drug abuse and alcoholism have also become additional factors in poor parenting practices.

The following is a list of specific factors involved in Indian child abuse and neglect among young Indian parents in the urban setting, culled from a report of the Oakland Urban Indian Center:

--a special form of immaturity and associated dependency that has been precipitated from the boarding school era and is mitigated by rising numbers of teenage pregnancies

--a tragically low self-esteem and sense of incompetence resulting from a feeling of racial inferiority imposed by the dominant society over the past centuries

--difficulty in seeking pleasure and finding satisfaction in the adult world

--difficulty in adjusting to the demands of the dominant society which is seen as being both exclusive and requiring assimilation

--feeling of loss of control and power (the frustration that comes from a feeling of helplessness up against a greater force that appears to be the enemy)

--social isolation, from the extended family or any other support community to assist in child-rearing

--lack of parenting skills (misperception of the infant's abilities, lack of empathy for the infant's needs, fear of spoiling the child, strong belief in the values of corporal punishment, lack of access to resources, programs, and services

--difficulty in coming to accept responsibility for their own lives

--overcoming external and internal limitations to their ability to provide an adequate living

As the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 takes its place among the legislation relating to the American Indian, it becomes more feasible to address some of these problems directly. Tribal councils and other Indian agencies are now empowered by law to develop programs and services that will provide alternatives to family violence and disruption, and will assist in addressing Indian child welfare issues.

Other papers deal more extensively with cultural traits to be considered by social service delivery personnel in working with Indian families, and with types of programs and services available.

In summation: it is impossible to be a good parent unless first of all you feel good about yourself as a person, unless you have some parenting models to follow, unless you have a community of support, unless you have information about and access to programs and services, and unless you have occasional relief from the overwhelming responsibilities of child-rearing. These are the root problems, and unless we address them, we will continue to apply the proverbial band-aid to the proverbial cancer.

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(See other resource papers on "The Boarding School Syndrome", "The Extended Family and Its Relationship to Parenting," "The Social Worker and the Indian Client," and "Working With Abusive/Neglectful Indian Parents.")